

# Talking About Difficult Times to Children

## *STAY CALM, LISTEN, AND OFFER REASSURANCE*

- **Be a role model.**
- **Be aware of how you talk about the difficulty.** Your discussion about COVID-19 can increase or decrease your child's fear. If true, remind your child that your family is healthy, and you are going to do everything within your power to keep loved ones safe and well.
- **Explain social distancing.** Children probably don't fully understand why parents / guardians aren't allowing them to be with friends. Showing older children the "flatten the curve" charts will help them grasp the significance of social distancing. Explain that while we don't know how long it will take to "flatten the curve" to reduce the number of those infected, we do know that this is a critical time—we must follow the guidelines of health experts to do our part.
- **Demonstrate deep breathing.** Deep breathing is a valuable tool for calming the nervous system. Do breathing exercises with your children.
- **Focus on the positive.** Celebrate having more time to spend as a family. Make it as fun as possible. Do family projects. Create masterpieces. Sing, laugh, and go outside, if possible, to connect with nature and get needed exercise. Allow older children to connect with their friends virtually.
- **Establish and maintain a daily routine.** Keeping a regular schedule provides a sense of control, predictability, calm, and well-being.
- **Identify projects that might help others.** This could include: writing letters to the neighbors or others who might be stuck at home alone or to healthcare workers; sending positive messages over social media; or reading a favorite children's book on a social media platform for younger children to hear.
- **Offer lots of love and affection.**

## ***MONITOR TELEVISION VIEWING AND SOCIAL MEDIA***

- Parents/guardians should monitor television, internet, and social media viewing—both for themselves and their children. Watching continual updates may increase fear and anxiety. Developmentally inappropriate information, or information designed for adults, can also cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children.
- Dispel rumors and inaccurate information. Explain to your child that many stories on the internet may include rumors and inaccurate information. Older children, in particular, may be accessing a great deal of information online and from friends that contains inaccuracies. Talk to your child about factual information.
- Provide alternatives. Engage your child in games or other exciting activities instead.

## ***TAKE TIME TO TALK***

- **Let your children's questions guide you.** Answer their questions truthfully, but don't offer unnecessary details or facts. Don't avoid giving them the information that experts indicate as crucial to your children's well-being. Often, children and youth do not talk about their concerns because they are confused or don't want to worry loved ones. Younger children absorb scary information in waves. They ask questions, listen, play, and then repeat the cycle. Children always feel empowered if they can control some aspects of their life. A sense of control reduces fear.

## ***BE HONEST AND ACCURATE***

- **Correct misinformation.** Children often imagine situations worse than reality; therefore, offering developmentally appropriate facts can reduce fears.
- **Explain simple safety steps.**
- **Stay up-to-date on the facts.**

## ***KEEP EXPLANATIONS AGE-APPROPRIATE***

- **Early elementary school children.** Provide brief, simple information that balances facts with appropriate reassurances that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people make every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as "adults are working hard to keep you safe."
- **Upper elementary and early middle school children.** This age group often is more vocal in asking questions about whether they indeed are safe and what will happen if the problem spreads in their area. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss the efforts national, state, and community leaders are doing to prevent germs from spreading.
- **Upper middle and high school students.** Issues can be discussed in more depth. Refer them to appropriate sources for facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information. Engage them in decision-making about family plans, scheduling, and helping with chores at home.
- *For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!*

## ***BE AWARE OF YOUR CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH***

Most children will manage well with the support of parents and other family members, even if showing signs of some anxiety or concerns, such as difficulty sleeping or concentrating. Some children, however, may have risk factors for more intense reactions, including severe anxiety, depression, and suicidal behaviors. Risk factors can include a pre-existing mental health problem, prior traumatic experiences or abuse, family instability, or the loss of a loved one. Parents and caregivers should contact a professional if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the following symptoms for more than 2 weeks.

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*Compiled from National Association of School Psychologists*

